

Hacking the CIA Director: What John Brennan's Emails Reveal

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Global Research, October 24, 2015

Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [Intelligence](#)

The CIA director's position can prove hazardous. General David Petraeus found that out personally when he had to resign after falling on the sword of mixing classified information with private pleasure. The consequences of such a breach were never grave – what mattered was the way he handled the information.

Current CIA director John Brennan is finding out, just as Hillary Clinton did, how information on private, non-government email accounts is all too accessible for the larrikin eye. If you are sufficiently prominent, and sufficiently dangerous, you are bound to be the subject of a hack. Calling themselves Crackas with Attitude (CWA), a self-described teenage group of hackers managed this week to carry out some “social engineering” (that is, acts of hacking) on Brennan's AOL account.

It is not clear to what extent the CWA had Brennan on the ropes, but according to a member, it was serious enough for the director to actually engage in what was described as a “cat-and-mouse game”. Describing the episode to WIRED magazine, the member discloses their response to Brennan's question as to what the group wanted. “We just want Palestine to be free and for you to stop killing innocent people.”[1] Eventually it got too much: Brennan chose to close the account altogether.

By that time, it was clear that enough material had been copied. From October 21, WikiLeaks began releasing documents concerning Brennan's AOL account. The link between the CWA and WikiLeaks has been assumed. The subject matter released so far is not overwhelming (there is, for instance, a list of contacts stored in the AOL email account of the director). Other documents, however, shed light on the inner workings of the security establishment, and Brennan's own personal security history, outlined in the SF86 form.

As far as the intelligence community is concerned, Brennan's July 15 2007 draft is his pitch on what challenges face the US security establishment. “Intelligence to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century” observes the importance of giving the intelligence community a push from its Cold War roots.

In a sentiment that pre-dates the Snowden disclosure by six years, Brennan notes the need, “In light of the seriousness of the transnational terrorist threat [...] to set the appropriate balance between conducting domestic intelligence operations and protecting the privacy rights and liberties of US persons.”[2] All agencies engaged in intelligence activities on US soil had to do so “consistent with our laws and reflect the democratic principles and values of our Nation.” So much, it would seem, for that.

There is another document authored by Brennan describing recommendations for the next

president assuming office in 2009 on the “conundrum” that is Iran. “Tone Down the Rhetoric” and “Establish a Direct Dialogue with Tehran” are key points that mark a departure from the Bush administration’s obsession with the “Axis of Evil”. Be “realistic” is another.

In what is a rather sensible suggestion, Brennan disputes the value of using “third parties” such as the Swiss to convey messages between Washington and Tehran. “Iran’s importance to US strategic interests and to overall stability in the region necessitates the establishment of a direct and senior-level dialogue between Washington and Tehran”.^[3] A presidential envoy is also recommended.

There is also some discussion on operational details on how the CIA is to deal with that nasty practice of torture, so willingly practiced during the Bush-era. They stem from Sen. Christopher Bond, Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, whose note (May 7, 2008) to fellow members suggests a residual endorsement for various torturous practices among such individuals as then Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell and CIA Director Michael Hayden.

A floated proposal to require intelligence agencies to specifically use the 19 techniques authorised by the US Army Field Manual was immediately rejected by both Hayden and McConnell. Both “expressed concern that the AFM fails to exhaust the universe of techniques that could be authorized consistent with the Geneva Conventions.”

Bond wishes to straddle the divide, allowing harsh interrogation techniques while still keeping the intelligence services within the remit of international and domestic law. “Rather than authorizing intelligence agencies to use only those techniques that are allowed under the AFM [Army Field Manual], I believe the more prudent approach is to preclude the use of specific techniques that are prohibited under the AFM.” Specificity, in other words, should only go to disallowance rather than what is permitted. “In this way, Congress can state clearly that certain harsh interrogation techniques will not be permissible.”^[4]

Bond also ventures into what prohibitions should be abided by, suggesting that he has been looking long and hard at the legacy of Abu Ghraib with its extensive stash of torture as pornography.^[5] These include: forcing the detainee to be naked, perform sexual acts, posing in a sexual manner, placing hoods or sacks over the detainee’s head, using duct tape over eyes, applying beatings, electric shock, burns, and such forms of physical pain, mock executions, and the deprivation of the adequate food, water or medical care.

Much of these outlines are the basic, kindergarten injunctions acknowledged by an assortment of conventions, though it says much that there is even a debate about them. More to the point, they suggest that enhanced interrogation, as it is euphemistically termed, should remain flexible, with non-exhaustive techniques that might sail close to the winds of legality. The subsequent bill, titled “Limitations on Interrogation Techniques Act of 2008” sets out “to prohibit the use of certain interrogation techniques and for other purposes”. It essentially replicates the spirit of Bond’s recommendations.^[6]

The usual recriminations have followed about whether such documents should, or should not, have been released. The issues are, however, far more fundamental. They do provide some insight, not all of it that surprising, about an official who makes decisions on a daily basis about life and limb. They also show a security official keen, in 2007, to warn about a

bureaucratic intelligence process that serves to undermine, rather than enhance, the functions of the Republic.

That said, much of Brennan's world is insipid and mundane – the lot of an intelligence director is not all murder, betrayal and spice. Nor do the emails, as yet, say much about Brennan as CIA director, notably on that testy area of extra-judicial killings. But as one of the Republic's most powerful agents, he might take better care in future about parking material in an AOL account.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.wired.com/2015/10/wikileaks-publishing-cia-director-john-brennan-hacked-emails/>
- [2] <https://wikileaks.org/cia-emails/Draft-Intel-Position-Paper/page-2.html>
- [3] <https://wikileaks.org/cia-emails/The-Conundrum-of-Iran/The-Conundrum-of-Iran.pdf>
- [4] <https://wikileaks.org/cia-emails/Torture/page-1.html>
- [5] <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib>
- [6] <https://wikileaks.org/cia-emails/Torture-Ways/page-1.html>

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